

MONTE CASSINO

Report on the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium of 1975*

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FROM May 1 to May 3, 1975, a Symposium was held at Dumbarton Oaks on Monte Cassino under the direction of the present writer. In the introductory lecture I emphasized the important role which the chief foundation of St. Benedict had played in the Middle Ages, especially in the three hundred years between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, both as a cultural and as an ecclesiastical center, and called attention to particularly significant work on Monte Cassino, either in progress or forthcoming. The first speaker was Mr. Paul Meyvaert, Executive Secretary of the Mediaeval Academy of America, whose talk was entitled "Monte Cassino—*Fons et origo totius religionis*."

In this paper Mr. Meyvaert reviewed recent discussion of the historicity of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great and the relationship of the Rule of St. Benedict to the Rule of the Master. The basic facts concerning the life of St. Benedict cannot be brought into question. He did indeed found the abbey of Monte Cassino, and he did write a Rule in which he borrowed extensively from the Rule of the Master. Nevertheless, it is clear that in the sixth and seventh centuries Monte Cassino did not occupy an exceptional position in the monastic world. It was the political decision of the Carolingian rulers to impose the Rule of St. Benedict on all the monasteries in their dominions which led Monte Cassino (and its monastic usages) to acquire a position of ascendancy. Carolingian

writers could refer to the abbey as *fons et origo totius religionis* (the fount and origin of all monastic life).

As time went on, Monte Cassino became more and more willing to assert its own preeminence. The culmination of this attitude is found in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries when Cassinese writers speak of their abbey as the Mount Sinai of the monastic world. Various hagiographic traditions helped to reinforce such a view. A myth was thus created which has continued to exercise its influence in the history of western culture. Without underestimating the importance of Monte Cassino—its monastic traditions, its transmission of the classics, its library and artistic treasures—we must acknowledge that only a sober and serious history of the abbey over the centuries (yet to be written) would enable us to see these achievements in perspective, and measure them against the standard set by St. Benedict himself, that his monastery should be a *dominici schola servitii* (a school of the Lord's service).

Dr. Henry M. Willard's lecture, "The Treasure of Monte Cassino in the Earlier Middle Ages," concentrated on the staurotheca of Romanus still kept in the abbey. The description and history of this relic is published in this volume under the title "The Staurotheca of Romanus at Monte Cassino" (pp. 55–64).

The present writer then treated a highly controversial subject in a paper entitled "The Puzzle of the Bronze Doors of Monte Cassino: An Interdisciplinary Approach," in which he presented the results of part of his forthcoming work *Monte Cassino in the Middle Ages*. Together with the pavement of the basilica, fragments of which were rediscovered in the excavations after the war, these doors seemed to be a remnant of the reconstruction of the monastery by the great Abbot Deside-

* The present writer wishes to express his warmest thanks to Mr. Paul Meyvaert and Professor Pierre Toubert for supplying him with résumés of their papers, which have been incorporated in this report. It seemed redundant to summarize those papers that are published in this volume or that have appeared elsewhere.

rius. But a thorough study of the list of possessions which covers the panels of the surviving doors, combined with an investigation of the figures of patriarchs and apostles which were discovered in 1944 on the backs of some of the panels, seems to provide a rational explanation of this monument in its historical framework.

Professor Pierre Toubert's paper bore the title "L'environnement économique et social de l'abbaye du Mont-Cassin aux X^e-XII^e siècles." In view of the inaccessibility of much of the unpublished documentation, Professor Toubert limited himself to outlining an evolution which appeared to lend itself to a comparison with that of neighboring Latium during the same period, a subject with which the speaker is more familiar. By concentrating his analysis on the *Terra Sancti Benedicti*, he was able to establish that a sweep identical with that of Latium allows us to define three principal chronological stages:

1. The eighth and ninth centuries are for Monte Cassino a first phase of territorial expansion, where, as for the abbeys of Latium (such as Farfa and Subiaco), the basic structure of the economic and social organization is constituted by the great estate (*curtis*).

2. The end of the ninth and the first third of the tenth centuries mark everywhere a crisis and a caesura. After the third decade of the tenth century, the economic expansion is resumed on new bases: it is less and less the *curtis* and more and more the fortified village (*castrum*) which forms the fundamental structure of the *patrimonium* of Monte Cassino. The analysis of the morphology of the term *castrum* and of its functions, mainly on the basis of the charters of "incastellamento" preserved in Monte Cassino, played a major part in the lecture.

3. Finally, beginning with the middle of the eleventh and especially in the course of the twelfth centuries, Monte Cassino was confronted with the vital problem of the coexistence and later the integration with the Norman state. The result for the *Terra Sancti Benedicti* was a last phase of "incastellamento," active and original in comparison with what one can observe in the Pontifical State of the same period.

In conclusion, the speaker stated that, from the point of view of its economic and social background, Monte Cassino does not differ substantially from the other great abbeys of central Italy. One must look elsewhere for the causes and the character of its originality.

This was done for one most significant aspect of the contribution of Monte Cassino by Professor Francis Newton in his paper on "The Desiderian Scriptorium," which appears in the present volume (pp. 35-54). It gives an illuminating insight into the large-scale palaeographical study in which this scholar has been engaged.

Professor Günter Urban's elucidation of the basilica of Desiderius was based on a major work already completed, an investigation of certain medieval churches in Campania, which led to the conclusion that all of them followed a masterplan, inspired by mathematical principles which go back to Vitruvius. He found that the exemplar of this plan was the basilica of Desiderius, which emerges as a work of greater originality than had been believed, even if it remains an incontrovertible fact that the model of the Early Christian basilica was a powerful influence. Professor Urban's paper has in the meantime been published under the title "Die Klosterakademie von Montecassino und der Neubau der Abteikirche im 11. Jahrhundert," *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 15 (1975), 11-23.

The all-pervading influence of Desiderian art in the field of painting was the subject of the next two papers. Dr. Carlo Bertelli, in his "Mediaeval Painting in Campania between Byzantium and the West," discussed the pictorial decoration of three virtually unknown country churches just outside the *Terra Sancti Benedicti*: S. Marco di Cellole (in the diocese of Sessa Aurunca), whose frescoes were restored in the time of Desiderius; the paintings of the apse of S. Maria in Caldana (north of Mondragone, formerly the diocese of Carinola) which are very close to those of Sant'Angelo in Lauro and reflect the influence of the generation of Sant'Angelo in Formis; and S. Antonio in Cascano (in the diocese of Sessa Aurunca) with remnants of frescoes of a later date.

Mme Hélène Toubert's paper, entitled

“‘Rome et le Mont-Cassin’: Nouvelles remarques sur les fresques de l’église inférieure de Saint-Clément de Rome,” presented new arguments in favor of an impact of Monte Cassino on the famous frescoes in San Clemente, partly on the basis of recent historical and hagiographical findings. It is published in this volume (pp. 1–33).

For my final lecture I selected from among the numerous dependencies of Monte Cassino the one which stands out because of the preservation of its rich archives, the convent of St. John the Baptist in Capua. These documents are partly extant in the original and partly incorporated in an unpublished,

recently rediscovered history of the convent by Michele Monaco, the foremost historian of Capua. They allow us to follow the story of this convent from before its foundation in 972 to the early seventeenth century. The lost doors of the church, rebuilt in the thirties of the twelfth century, were the work of “magister” Oderisius of Benevento. They are known to us from a drawing by Monaco and enable us, by comparing them with the bronze doors of the cathedral of Troia, to understand the development of this remarkable artist who brought to an end Italy’s dependence on bronze doors from Constantinople.